

by Jeff Worley

This complex story involves art theft, smuggling, greed, and the curses of African ancestral spirits. And at the center of it all in 1999 was Monica Udvardy, an associate professor of anthropology at UK.

Her journey into the world of the illegal art trade was triggered by a snapshot she had taken 14 years earlier of a memorial statue that belonged to an elderly tribesman named Kalume Mwakiru, a member of an East African group of people in Kenya called the Giriama. Within this group is the all-male Gohu society. “Some men in the society are skilled carvers and are paid to create vigango—memorial statues—for the dead Gohu member,” Udvardy explains, whose interest in gender and aging led her to study this group.

The posts, which range from four to nine feet tall, are created from indigenous termite-resistant hardwood. They consist of a circle for the head and rectangle for the body, and vary in decoration. “The key feature of the Gohu society is how they honor their members when

Kalume, photographed by Monica Udvardy in 1985, with his vigango, the memorial statues that represent his two deceased brothers. His vigango were stolen less than month after this photo was taken.



On the Trail of Stolen Statues



UK's Monica Udvardy (left), Gohu secret society elders and an anthropologist Linda Giles stand in front of the metal enclosure designed to protect the now famous statues from theft.

they die. Vigango are sacred objects; they are thought to embody the spirits of dead ancestors."

The importance of vigango can't be understated, Udvardy adds. "These statues are the tangible link between the living and the dead, and must be honored through animal sacrifice and libations. The Gohu believe that failure to perform these rituals or, worse yet, removing vigango from their erection sites—an act the Giriama have an explicit prohibition against—will trigger the curse of the ancestral spirit." This curse can take the form of bodily illness or death of the descendants, as well as drought and diseased livestock.

"Vigango are considered *the* art form of East Africa," says Udvardy, who likes to emphasize particularly important points by punctuating the air with a forefinger. "But most Westerners fail to realize these objects are ritual artifacts that are part of a living culture."

And here's where the problem starts. Because of their value to Westerners as art, there's a market for vigango, especially in the United States. These statues are part of a global \$4.5 billion-a-year industry. "Traffic in cultural artifacts is the third-largest illegal industry, after the drug trade and arms smuggling," Udvardy says.

She discovered that Kalume's vigango were among the missing when she visited him again. "Tears were rolling down his cheeks when he told me his vigango had been stolen," Udvardy says, visibly moved by the memory. "He asked me to help him locate them, which I did sporadically whenever I was down on the coast, looking in hotel lobbies and tourist shops, where you sometimes see them. But I never found his statues—until 15 years later."

Serendipity and eureka share a moment

In 1999 Udvardy traveled to Philadelphia to take part in a panel on Mijikenda culture at the African

Studies Association annual conference. "I talked about the Gohu society, and among the images I showed were slides of Kalume with his two statues." It just so happened that fellow anthropologist Linda Giles from Illinois State University was the next presenter. She showed slides of her university museum's large collection of African artifacts, including 38 vigango.

"I yelled, 'Stop! Go back one.' There was one of Kalume's statues!" And in that eureka moment, Udvardy clearly saw her future as a cultural activist. "Linda and I decided right there that we needed to try to repatriate the statue."

Four months later, Udvardy and Giles met up at Illinois State University, where they spent hours pouring over U.S. African Art museum catalogs. And this is where they found Kalume's second stolen statue in the museum collection at Hampton University in Virginia. "This propelled us into a massive search into the extent of vigango theft, and though Linda and I had done research for years, this was foreign territory for us. I was a specialist in gender theory, not stolen cultural property, museums, and international laws prohibiting traffic in stolen property!" The two began a broad-based correspondence with museum curators and directors all over the United States to learn which museums had vigango, how many they had, who had donated them, and when, where and how they were originally collected and brought to the United States.

As energized as Udvardy was to continue to follow these various threads, her research was confined to summers since she usually teaches five courses a year at UK and is director of Undergraduate Studies in anthropology.

The next five summers saw a whirlwind of activity as Udvardy and Giles continued their vigango research in the United States and in Kenya. They wrote formal letters to the two museums that had Kalume's statues, informing the curators about the discovery of the statues and requesting that the museums repatriate them to the Mwakiru family, worked with the National Museums of Kenya to get them actively involved, gave papers at national conferences about the statues, wrote and published

articles in anthropological journals, traveled to museums that had substantial collections of vigango, and interviewed curators and gallery owners about the process of acquisition of the stolen artwork and the desire in the West for African art.

Then during Udvardy's sabbatical in Kenya in 2005 to 2006, the plot of the missing vigango began to heat up.

She went back to Kenya in the winter of 2006 with Giles to locate the family from whom the statues had been stolen. "We found the family and learned that the man who had erected those two statues in 1983—I interviewed him in 1985—Mr. Kalume Mwakiru, had died in 1987," Udvardy recalls. "Now his homestead belonged to one of Kalume's former wives and his nephew Festus William Tinga. We sat down with them, and with John Mitsanze, our Kenyan collaborator, who explained that we knew where the statues were. Their jaws literally dropped."

Kalume's widow and Tinga then told the three about all the misfortune that had befallen them since the theft of the vigango. There had been a severe drought in Kenya for several years, which they believed was caused by the loss of the statues, and Kalume's widow attributed the death of her husband to the theft.

"So we asked them if they wanted the statues back, and they said, 'Of course.'"

Udvardy and Giles then compiled a summary of all the misfortunes that Kalume's widow and Tinga attributed to the loss of the statues as the basis for a letter. "Sort of a 'to whom this may concern' kind of appeal," Udvardy says.

The anthropologists included this letter in an up-to-the-minute PowerPoint presentation they gave a few weeks later to the director and staff at the Mombasa branch of the National Museums of Kenya. This group was familiar with Udvardy and Giles's research, so they knew about the continuing problem of the stolen statues. What they didn't know was the extent of the thievery.

"We had documented more than 360 vigango in American museum collections at this point, which both surprised and upset the museum staff. After a heated discussion focused on demanding all of them back, they realized that they didn't have the museum facilities to curate all of these because

they are so tall and heavy. So instead, they came around to the idea of focusing on the two statues that Linda and I had documented so thoroughly as a way to highlight the theft of cultural property from Africa."

The director of the coastal branches of the National Museums of Kenya, Phillip Jimbi Katana, then wrote letters to the two U.S. museums that had the statues.

Meanwhile, Udvardy and Giles wanted to do what they could to raise public awareness about these art thefts. And as if on some serendipitous cue, Udvardy crossed paths with someone who could do just that.

In their hotel in Mombasa, the researchers met a man named Mike Pflantz, an international newspaper correspondent. He asked them why they were in Mombasa, so they told him their story. Pflantz was intrigued and wrote a piece about this for the *Christian Science Monitor*. The article immediately attracted major international attention.

"This article set off a deluge of interviews," Udvardy says, her voice still registering the surprise of this turn of events in March 2006. Over 30 newspapers covered this story, including *The New York Times*, which gave it two-thirds of a page in their Easter Sunday edition. The BBC and NPR also jumped on the story.



The vigango now lay in honor inside the metal enclosure. Gohu tradition does not permit the statues to be re-erected.



The next major turn of the wheel happened in September when Kenya sent a prestigious delegation to the Illinois State Museum, which had immediately agreed to return the statue after receiving the letter sent from the head of the Mombasa museum. Both Illinois senators sent representatives to this event. “The museum did a terrific job in hosting this event. They built a special crate for the vigango and hosted a daylong series of events for the delegation and for us in Springfield. It was a hugely successful PR event,” says Udvardy. This was the first time that a stolen artifact had been returned to Kenya from the United States.

But things, surprisingly, didn’t go nearly so well at Hampton University, a historically black university.

“The museum officials there simply refused. Their press release said that they had legally acquired the statue and, therefore, they were not going to return it.” But a few weeks after the return event in Springfield, Udvardy says, Hampton University suddenly relented. By February 2007, both vigango were back in Kenya in the custody of the National Museums of Kenya.

The Handover Ceremony

Katana, principal curator of museums, began to make arrangements for what Udvardy calls the “handover” ceremony—the return of the statues to their original site. He drew up a list of regional and national dignitaries to invite to this ceremony and

The men of the tribe dance as part of the handover celebration. The dancers, wearing sashes with mirrors that represent medals, parody marching British soldiers.

returned the statues in a cage-like metal enclosure to help assure their safety.

By now, Udvardy explains, these vigango were famous, and the museum staff wanted to make sure the statues wouldn’t be stolen again.

At the June 20 event, framed by coconut palms, baobab trees, and the villagers’ mud-walled huts, Udvardy and Giles were welcomed back with open arms. The Kenyan museum board chairman was there. The senior deputy secretary for national heritage was there. The 100 dignitaries who ringed the speaker’s platform were a who’s who of regional and national politicians and arts administrators.

“The National Museums of Kenya did an incredible job of providing the temporary infrastructure needed for this event, which drew hundreds of people locally,” says Udvardy, setting the scene. “They had to bring up a generator from Mombasa to run the microphones, they had to truck in plastic chairs, and they brought their cooks from the museum restaurant. The people from the village had never seen anything like this—they’re still reeling from it all.”

The ceremony itself included speeches, dance troupe performances and feasting. The keynote speech was given by the minister of Tourism and Wildlife, Morris Dzoro. And Udvardy and Giles were asked to speak to the group, too.

“We wanted to congratulate everybody in the village for their part in this success story—the incredible interest and effort they displayed,” Udvardy says, adding that their words were translated by their Kenyan colleague, John Mitsanze, into KiGiriama. “And we stressed the importance of maintaining their local culture.”

From the beginning, Udvardy’s goal was to raise public awareness about the devastating impact on local communities of the widespread global marketing of the statues, and by anybody’s reckoning, she and Giles were hugely successful at doing this. One measure of this success is that other galleries in the United States have begun to follow Udvardy’s lead. The owner of the Insiders/Outsiders Art Gallery in Cornwall Bridge, Connecticut, for example, recently returned nine vigango to a museum in Kenya.

What’s next?

“I’m working on a book right now,” Udvardy says. And I’m also in the beginning stages of putting together a film on this entire adventure.” ■

How did this story begin? Visit www.research.uky.edu/odyssey/spring04/africa.